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The Pentagon: Caught in the Chains of Command

HEAVY LOSSES

The Dangerous Decline of American Defense

By James Coates and Michael Kilian
 Viking. 430 pp. \$22.95

By Bruce Palmer Jr.

THIS IS a provocative book about an immense, complex, deadly important and increasingly controversial subject—the U.S. defense establishment. For the first time to my knowledge, someone has examined in one paper the entire interlocking American defense apparatus: the Pentagon and the White House; the Congress;

the president as commander-in-chief, the national chain of command, and its supporting command, control and communications facilities; the National Security Council; the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the armed services; the national intelligence community; the procurement of new weapons systems; defense-oriented corporations and contractors; scientists concerned about defense; and the so-called "Iron Triangle"—the Department of Defense, the Congress, and the defense industry.

In addition to this bill of particulars, the authors have included an excellent essay on the Soviet threat; a searching appraisal of the all-volunteer force, bringing out its major weaknesses—largely side-stepped by past and present administrations; a perceptive discussion of the military, the media, and popular support in wartime; and a dissertation about allies and the arms trade.

In toto, the book is a large dose to assimilate. Nevertheless the two authors, James Coates and Michael Kilian, both veteran defense correspondents for *The Chicago Tribune* have highly respectable credentials in their chosen field and are well qualified to make their subject understandable to the ordinary reader. They have done a skillful job of tying the whole intricate subject together, in the process showing the interrelated nature of the numerous factors involved and the interactions of the major players that shape our foreign and defense policies.

The authors' basic

thesis is that "the nation is moving too close to war and too far from strength," contending that we lack a cohesive overall strategic concept to guide our defense leaders; that there

is a pervasive over-emphasis on nuclear weaponry with a corresponding neglect of conventional forces; and that the U.S. military is completely dominated by suffocating levels of superfluous civilian control. Charging that U.S. defenses are "costly and weak," the authors further contend that we are on the way to building a far more costly defense establishment largely because of a vast DOD-industrial-congressional complex that is driven to a great extent by self-interests and is corrupting our officer corps.

THE AUTHORS' most urgent concerns lie in three major areas: (1) the defense procurement system and its corrupt, incestuous relationship with defense-oriented industries and with elements of the Congress that have defense constituencies; (2) our unwieldy and top-heavy central defense organization; and (3) the Joint Chiefs of Staff that is denied a meaningful voice in the councils of government.

To correct these potentially fatal flaws, the authors propose a comprehensive and inter-related set of constructive reforms that range from the National Security Council, the Pentagon and the Congress through service roles and missions to functional areas such as the procurement of weapons systems, defense manpower and personnel, national intelligence, and communications for command and control at the national level.

The authors, for example, would upgrade the position of national security adviser to the president and upgrade the NSC staff; give more authority to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and place the JCS in the operational chain of command; professionalize the Joint Staff but in American not Prussian fashion; strictly enforce conflict-of-interest laws pertaining to the interchange of civilian and military personnel between government weapons development and procurement offices and defense industries; eliminate early military retirement policies and other incentives that result in the loss of experienced, trained officers to defense industries; and drastically alter the preferred status of the industrial giants dealing with defense.

These are only some of the authors' recom-

mendations—there are many others. The authors recognize that many of their suggestions are more theoretically than politically possible, but nevertheless persist in the belief that reform is not only possible but urgently needed. Although some of their proposals, such as a major overhaul of service roles and missions, are probably not politically feasible, many of their recommendations, in the opinion of this reviewer, are politically feasible and are worth serious consideration on an urgent basis. For example, the authors would abolish the civilian posts of service secretary of the army, navy and air force and reestablish them as under secretaries of defense for their respective services; and place the chairman of the JCS in the chain of command reporting directly to both the president in his role of commander of chief and to the secretary of defense; and make the chairman of the JCS a member of the NSC.

On the negative side, the authors frequently reveal a bias and are not always objective or balanced in their judgments. Some judgments are based on incomplete knowledge and some of their sources appear to be more hearsay than first-hand accounts. And indeed some of their "facts" are outdated and

some are just plain wrong. For example the "pay inversion" problem, whereby retired-pay cost-of-living adjustments were outgaining active-duty pay raises, was a temporary phenomenon corrected several years ago. The authors' refer to an Army-owned island in New York Harbor, apparently under the impression that Governors Island, formerly the site of First Army Headquarters, still belongs to the Army. The Department of Defense, however, turned this facility, including

the ferry boat, over to the Coast Guard some 20 years ago. In short, the authors often come on too strong and overstate their case, thereby unnecessarily antagonizing those who oppose reform and want to maintain the status quo.

On balance, however, although such imperfections detract from the book, they cannot mute its powerful message which we Americans should heed before it is too late and we wake up to find that we can no longer afford to defend ourselves. ■

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